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Memories of Life at Radcliffe

Ruth Hubbard

I came to Radcliffe in September 1941, three months before Pearl Harbor. That year and the next were the last gasp of the old Radcliffe at which Harvard and Radcliffe classes were entirely separate, but taught by the same and, of course, entirely male Harvard faculty.

Try to imagine: Harvard professors would give their lectures to a large class of Harvard “men” and then come and repeat the same lecture to a much smaller class of Radcliffe “girls.” Radcliffe, at that point, was about one-quarter the size of Harvard. Especially in the sciences (I majored in biochemical sciences), Radcliffe classes were much smaller than the same classes were at Harvard.

The senior professors--Harvard’s “great men”--were less than thrilled to have to repeat their lectures at Radcliffe. The lower-rank faculty members, who sometimes were detailed off to teach the introductory science courses at Radcliffe instead of teaching Harvard students, felt even more *déclassé*.

Let me say at once that I think Radcliffe's pride in the fact that we were taught entirely by Harvard faculty was ill conceived. The fact that Radcliffe never developed a faculty of its own, as did Barnard, was a terrible mistake. We were second-class, or indeed nth-class, citizens from day one. And this certainly affected our day-to-day experience as students--and especially in the sciences, where myth still has it that women are “by nature” less adept than men.

For example, my freshman year I took introductory chemistry. The class was taught by a young man who felt he was being exiled to the boondocks. Fresh from Dartmouth, he always wore his green blazer and dripped disdain. Our lab instructor was a woman graduate student. She was nice enough, but soon married a fellow graduate student and decided there were better things to do with her life than study chemistry at a place where her husband might some day get a job, but she never would.

During the summer following my freshman year, I went to summer school. This was the beginning of the three-term, year-round schedule that operated throughout the war so as to give the men a chance to get their undergraduate degrees before being drafted into the armed services. But that summer, it was still also summer school and therefore coed.

I took introductory biology. The zoology part was taught by Professor Frederick Hisaw, one of the elder statesmen in the biology department, whose research focused on the hormones of the female reproductive system. Soon news trickled down to us (I don't remember by what route) that he resented having to teach a coed class because it forced him to clean up the humor in his lectures. His teaching fellows included women as well as men. So, it isn't that there weren't any women around. Just that they were second-class citizens, clearly not even to be considered for a faculty post.

Sometimes it was worse than that. Some 50 years later, the woman graduate student who mentored me during my undergraduate research project told me that one of the younger biology professors had refused to let her enroll in his course. She could audit it but could not take part in class discussions or take the exam and, therefore, could not

get credit. And, since the subject matter was close to her thesis research, she did exactly that. Why didn't she report it to the Radcliffe graduate school? All she could say, all those years later, was that she just accepted the situation; but that very fact is an indication of the prevailing atmosphere.

A final story. That summer--still 1941--I also took the first semester of introductory physics in summer school. It was a large class, taught in the largest lecture hall in the physics building, and somehow not until the semester was almost over did I wake up to the fact that I and another woman were the only two females in the course, and she didn't go to Radcliffe. Of course, that meant that the second semester of Physics I would not be given at Radcliffe, but only at Harvard, that fall.

I presented my problem to the professor who taught the course and asked whether I couldn't just continue with the other (male) students and take the second semester at Harvard. He didn't see why not, but suggested I talk to the chairman of the Physics Department. He, too, saw no reason why that shouldn't work, but felt we needed to get approval from the Governing Boards of Harvard and Radcliffe, so that I could get credit for the course. We petitioned and both Harvard and Radcliffe refused. (A year later classes were merged, but that fall it was impossible for one lone Radcliffe student to attend a class at Harvard.) At this point the Physics Department came up with the idea that, if I could persuade three Radcliffe students to take the second semester of Introductory Physics before they had had the first semester, the department would send us an instructor to give the lectures and another to teach the lab, and that's what we did. It

was extremely nice of them, but turned out to be a not very adequate course--nothing like the course the men had that fall at Harvard.

And that's the point. My undergraduate science experience was not anything like the experience the men had--at least not until after my second year, when our classes were merged. That is why I was not the least surprised at a table in Margaret Rossiter's *Women Scientists in America*, in which she arranges, in order, the colleges and universities at which the women scientists listed in the 1938 edition of *American Men of Science* (the annual compendium of distinguished American scientists) had received their undergraduate degrees.¹

At the top of the list stands Mount Holyoke, with 99 entries in *American Men of Science*. Next, in order, come Barnard (87), Smith (79), Vassar (73), and Wellesley (70); then four large coed universities; then Bryn Mawr (44) and Goucher (42); then six coed state universities; and finally, at number 18, Radcliffe with 27 entries, barely over a quarter as many as Mount Holyoke. In fact, Mount Holyoke had nearly as many distinguished chemists to its credit as Radcliffe had scientists in all fields.

From the beginning, Radcliffe apparently failed to recognize that, by proudly offering its students the privilege to sit at the feet of Harvard's Great Men, it lost the opportunity to awaken in us the expectation that we might some day become Great Women.

Toward the end of my last semester, I got into a conversation with my physical chemistry professor. The Great Man in the field had gone off to the war, as had many Harvard professors, and this was a younger man from a state university in the Midwest.

He asked what my plans were and I told him I was going to take a war-related research job and, after the war, go to graduate school or medical school. "If you go to graduate School," he said, "don't go to Radcliffe. You should not go to a school where you have no chance to become a faculty member." I must admit, I was too unaware to understand what he was telling me and, in the end, did come back to Radcliffe. But, that's another story.

It is worth remembering that, during the debate that preceded the decision to admit the first six women to the class that entered Harvard Medical School in the fall of 1945, the opponents of this radical plan--physicians all--argued that to admit women was to go against "the fundamental biological law that the primary function of women is to bear and raise children."²

Times have changed. But, we need to recognize that such nonsensical claims about "woman's nature" get revived again and again. And also, that women and men will not truly be equal at Harvard until students are as likely to encounter women as men at all levels of the faculty and administration and until the images that look down upon us from Harvard's hallowed walls include many more women than they do now.

Notes

1. Margaret Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).
2. Mary Roth Walsh, *Doctors Wanted: No Women Need Apply* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972).